

Saint Vincent de Paul



by Father Cyril Charles Martindale, S.J.

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In the latter half of the sixteenth century when Europe was in a turmoil two supreme miracles were granted - Francis de Sales and Vincent de Paul. Francis, along with that noble widow, Jeanne [Jane] de Chantal, had hoped to begin a Vincentian work - the "visitation" nuns were to have been as active as were Vincent's daughters. They came half a generation too soon for that: grilles closed around them.



In God's providence, that was right. Francis did his appointed work. But the new world, religiously speaking, was inaugurated by Vincent, himself a peasant.

Early Life

Jean de Paul and Bertrande de Moras lived during the second half of the sixteenth century as small farmers in the extreme south-west of France, near Dax, in the parish of Pony. The "de" in their name does not imply nobility - they were frankly peasants. That they owned their little land, and sheep and cattle, does not imply wealth. They kept no servants; they did all their own work; their third son, Vincent, went through a phase when he was ashamed of his father, who was small and lame. But, later on, he willingly recalled that he started life as a simple shepherd-boy. He followed the slow flocks over the enormous plain of the Landes, as they went cropping poor grasses among sand. Such an one may grow thoughtful or, again, just stupid;

whether because he was the former, and a career seemed possible for him, or because he appeared the latter, destined to be no good on the land, and having to look to clerkship in order to pay his way, his father sent him to school when the boy was about twelve to the Franciscans down at Dax. This cost his parents sixty *livres* a year - they pinched to pay them.

His intelligence and quiet behaviour revealed themselves. He was but sixteen when a local lawyer, M. de Commet, chose him as "tutor" for his two boys, so that he could earn enough to continue his education without further burdening his parents. The sense of independence went to his head - it was now that he refused, once, to see his father, who tried to visit him: he blushed for the shabby, limping man. But Commet was pleased with him: he said he ought to be a priest. Vincent therefore received the tonsure and minor orders from the bishop of Tarbes in 1596. A touch of ambition showed itself. He demanded a proper ecclesiastical education, and went off to Saragossa, his father selling a yoke of oxen to provide him with sufficient funds. For some reason he stayed there next to no time, and returned from Spain to Toulouse, where he remained seven years at the university, helping his finances by tutoring, during vacation and even term-time, the sons of two or three neighbouring noblemen, who in their turn promised him their patronage. He took his degree, and, in consequence, lectured a little; and we must briefly insist that Vincent de Paul was not the unlettered naive philanthropist that one school of admirers has suggested. He was well read, well informed, and an insatiable observer of facts. He was to mix easily with men of the highest intelligence; and they saw through the humility which was to make him offer himself as a know-nothing to the world at large.

In 1599 his father died; and in the midst of his studies, 1600, Vincent was ordained priest by the Bishop of Perigueux. One swift-vanishing flash reveals the saint-to-be - he refused to say his First Mass in the company of any of his noble patrons; but went alone, save for the necessary assistants, up to a lonely mountain chapel for the purpose. M. de Commet offered him forthwith the parish of Thil; he accepted; but a rival appeared and said he had obtained, from Rome, that position. Vincent could not, or would not, take the matter to court, and returned to Toulouse. Thence he was summoned to Bordeaux. Why? Vincent has often made his own biography difficult by refusing to explain early episodes in his life, and even by tearing up his letters when he could get hold of them. So now. Did the Duc d'Epernon send for him in view of proposing him for a bishopric? So it has been asserted. Anyhow, Vincent returned to Toulouse in debt. Here he learned that an old lady had made a will in his favour - some furniture, and a few acres that had been assigned to her instead of a bad debt. Vincent first resolved to have the land sold; then he heard that the debtor had escaped to Marseilles and that if he went there he could arrest him and extract the money. He preferred money to land, because of his debts and the heavy "expense I saw I would reasonably incur in the matter that I do not dare to mention" (the bishopric?). So Vincent *sold* the horse he had *hired* at Toulouse, feeling sure he would be able to make it good later on. However, "God did not give me the success in my enterprise that appearances seemed to warrant". True, he reached Marseilles, "caught my man, had him put in gaol, and settled with him for 300 crowns, which he paid up". Vincent became very sensitive about this debt; but in this long, vivacious letter from which we quote, he is more hurt by the effect on his reputation, if he should not pay his debts, than concerned about the correctness of his procedure, nor is there any trace of that "kindliness" which afterwards was so notable in him.

Sold as a Slave

His troubles were but beginning. He was persuaded to shorten and cheapen his homeward journey by sailing from Marseilles to Narbonne. He would have got there within the day, had not three Turkish ships, on the look-out for folk returning from the famous Beaucaire fair, borne down on them. There was a fierce fight; everyone on Vincent's ship was killed or wounded; he himself received an arrow-wound "that will serve me for a clock for the rest of my life". The Turks, furious at the death of their captain, hacked the French pilot to pieces, seized the passengers, disembarked them at Tunis with a certificate that they had been taken from a Spanish ship (else the French consul would have rescued them), paraded them through the city five or six times, dressed in drawers, shirt, and cap, and a chain round their necks, and finally put them up for sale. Possible purchasers examined them like beasts, opened their mouths to see their teeth, thumped their ribs, undressed their wounds to see how deep they were, made them walk, trot, and run, carry burdens and wrestle. Vincent was sold to a fisherman, and then to an aged alchemist. Vincent found him "humane and manageable"; the old Mohammedan had spent fifty years in the search for the philosopher's stone, and at least succeeded in making mysterious alloys in the ten or fifteen furnaces that Vincent had to keep hot, an occupation that he ended by liking. Tractable as the old man was he tried hard to convert Vincent to Islam; but the young priest's unceasing prayers to Our Lady, he considered, kept him safe. From September 1605, therefore, till August 1606 Vincent worked for the alchemist, when that aged student was sent for by the Sultan, and, uprooted, died of homesickness on the way.

He bequeathed Vincent to his nephew, who re-sold him to an apostate Christian from Nice. This man had three wives -

one, a Greek schismatic, who was clever and displayed an affection for Vincent, but, says he, another, though Mohammedan and Turkish, was intensely interested in the Christian slave, and visited him daily in the fields where he was working, to make him sing her Christian hymns. Vincent sang: "By the waters of Babylon", recalling how "they that led us away captive required of us then a song - 'Sing us one of the songs of Sion!' " He sang, too, the Salve Regina. Each night the good lady returned to tell her husband that he had done wrong to give up his faith; and this prophetess-despite-herself - which is what Vincent means when he rather unsympathetically calls her a Caiaphas and a Balaam's ass! - did so well that her husband promised to escape to France, and after ten months did so, taking the slave with him, going by Aigues-Mortes to Avignon, where the Vice-Legate reconciled the apostate to the Church, and arranged for him, says Vincent, to enter a penitential congregation, "and for me, to find me a good living."

Priest and Courier

However little the letters of Vincent have revealed his true self hitherto, or given the slightest hint of what effects anguish or hope or faith had worked during those years in his soul, I am quite sure that they did exercise an immense influence, and that his desire for a remunerative living is chiefly due, henceforward, to his wish to pay his debts, which were seriously distressing him. The Vice-Legate, Cardinal Pietro Montorio, took a liking to Vincent, chiefly because of the mysterious arts that the young man had learnt from his Arab master, such as a ventriloquial and mechanical trick for making a skull talk, and the great man actually condescended to a pun on his own name, saying that Vincent had been worth more than a ton of gold to him - *un monte di oro*. Vincent had certainly been amused by the conjuring tricks, and interested by the scientific experiments

of the old alchemist - so much so that his attention to "occultism" was brought up against his memory by the "devil's advocate" during the preliminaries of his canonization later on. Anyhow, Montorio took him to Rome, where, during the day, he attended lectures at the Dominican college, the Sapienza, and at night met the Cardinal's important acquaintances. Of these, three were M. de Breves, a man versed in Eastern affairs, to whom Vincent's first-hand experience proved valuable; Charles Gonzaga, who had married the daughter of the last Duke of Lorraine; and Marquemont, auditor of the Rota, who were all concerned with the King of France's "Grand Design", the uniting of all Europe against Austria and Spain. Vincent was chosen to carry a despatch to Henri IV, though whether it related to this design can but be conjectured. In 1609 he therefore left Rome for France on a secret mission to the King. Not only Vincent never revealed what this mission was, but, after several visits to the Louvre, he left it, having neither obtained nor sought the slightest personal recognition, a fact sufficient to make him seem a fool to the men of his own day, and already half a saint to those of ours.

Vincent established himself in a small room near the hospital of charity that Marie de Medici had built but a couple of years before. He looked after the sick there, but was extremely poor. He wrote to his mother that he was too poor to leave Paris, that he must retrieve his fortunes, that he feared his poverty would deter any of his nephews from becoming students or priests. He begs for news from home, and wishes he could go there. Quaint occurrence - it was now (1610) that he was introduced, somehow, to Marguerite de Valois, whose marriage with Henri IV had long since been declared null, and who was living in her palace by the Seine. She surrounded her old age with paganism and piety, with art and alms-giving, made Vincent one of her almoners, and gave him his first chance of studying at close quarters the

social ulcers over which lace and silk were draped. In fact, in June of that year, he received a small "living" - a country abbacy involving no duties - on which presumably he just survived. Two significant incidents shine in this drab period. He encountered a learned theologian who confided to him that he was tempted against faith - tempted so strongly that either his faith or his reason must collapse. Vincent, after arguing and failing, asked God to allow himself to bear the temptation in his stead. The prayer was granted: apparent doubt sank on to Vincent's soul, like a stifling cloud; then, like a hood of lead. He redoubled his exterior works of charity; wrote out the Credo and placed it on his breast, and touched it when the agony waxed too strong. In desperation, he then vowed that at least he would serve God in His poor and sick, and the cloud lifted. . . . This far surpassed, in torment, the other incident, which was that a country judge, a compatriot from the Landes, who shared at first his room, accused Vincent of having stolen some money he had left in a cupboard. Vincent, who was sick, could not know that a doctor's messenger had taken it. Neither could he, nor did he, defend himself. For a while his reputation seemed ruined. But six months later, the thief confessed on his death-bed, and this cloud too was lifted.

But meanwhile an event of prime importance had happened - he met M. de Berulle. This man, born a noble and but little older than Vincent, had lived a life of such innocence at Court that Henri had used every endeavour to make him take a bishopric - the King really did want to have good Bishops. But no; his mother had become a Carmelite, and his ambition was, first, to bring the Carmelites into France and Paris, which he did; and, second, to found a Congregation of the Oratory, which he also did; and for a while Vincent lived, in much austerity, with Berulle. Saint Francis de Sales said that if he could choose to be anyone else, he would choose to be Berulle, and future saints flocked to him for direction.

His direction to Vincent was strange. The parish priest of Clichy was wanting to join the new-founded Oratory: Berulle, far from seeking to attract Vincent to it - nor indeed did Vincent ever dream of entering it - sent him to replace the priest at Clichy, and in May 1612 he was installed there. The parish was small, the church in ruins; but the people were devout. He restored the church - which still is standing in what has become a Parisian suburb - and after a while not a soul was absent from the monthly Sacraments.

Further, he assembled a dozen youths under his own roof, whom he prepared to be future priests. His was a parish of angels, he exclaimed; and neither Pope nor Cardinal was so happy as he was. But after a single year, he received a letter from Berulle bidding him leave Clichy. He stacked his furniture on a barrow, and left it with streaming eyes.

Had you known Vincent's destined life, you might have thought his preparation was now over, and that he might begin it. He had seen the "world", and its rougher side; he had suffered; he had served the sick and the poor; he had tasted community-life, and the life of a parish priest; he had made acquaintance with royalty and the great; he knew country, and he knew city, Paris, and the fields, university towns, and Rome. And forthwith life seems clipped short for him - he is sent back to be a tutor to a couple of small boys under a patron-lord. And as a parish priest he was succeeding; as a tutor, he felt himself bound to fail, and did so. However, he went.

Tutor to Boys

An extraordinary interlude followed. Philippe Emmanuel de Gondi, Comte de Joigny and General of the Galleys, required a tutor for his two sons, whom, incidentally, their aunt called "regular little demons". One died through a fall from his

horse while still a boy, having wished to be a Cardinal in order to take precedence over his brother; the elder became a soldier. Another son was born while Vincent was living at the Gondi's chateau, Montmirail, and became Cardinal de Retz. . . . Of him, a word below. In November 1613 Vincent entered the household of these tremendous nobles, and lived therein as in a Charterhouse. Though the See of Paris became almost an heirloom in the Gondi family, and despite the appalling career of Cardinal de Retz, one has to be certain that these men had in them a genuine faith and a fund of real religion, which is based on the recognition of the absolute Supremacy of God. In order so much as really to defy it, you must recognize it, and this race of geniuses (as the Gondi really were - military, financial, or diplomatic) always did. In so complicated yet violent a world, Vincent had no option but to take the situation supernaturally or not at all. He saw M. de Gondi "in God, and God in him, and Mme de Gondi as the Blessed Virgin". He tried to evangelize the household servants, of whom he was really one; he only appeared from his quarters when duty or necessity called him; and tried to teach the boys letters and morals, but, to judge from their parents' letters, failed. But somehow he obtained an influence over those very parents. M. de Gondi was booked to fight a duel - Vincent remonstrated and turned the whole of the tyrannical tradition of the period upside down - the courtier-soldier renounced this safeguarding of his honour. Mme de Gondi implored Vincent to become her director; he refused; Berulle ordered him to accept. They began to visit the sick, the poor. One day the priest called on a dying man whose life had seemed to be of unimpeachable respectability. The man confessed to having for a long time made sacrilegious confessions. He told not only Saint Vincent that this was so, but his territorial lords. Appalled by this revelation, the lady asked Vincent to preach on general confessions. He did so, on the feast of Saint Paul's conversion, 1617. The results were astounding.

Vincent, on his side, had been appalled by his own success. he had become a personage, quite apart from the all but adoration with which Mme de Gondi was by now enveloping him. He foresaw, too, the grandiose evangelistic schemes that she was hatching for his future. Again, he knew that he was not succeeding with the boys, whose parents a French biographer has described as being like doves, between their own parents and their children, both a brood of vultures. Political upheavals, too, and a series of assassinations, were setting all these great families agog, and the general spirit of the Gondi was that of Philippe's father Albert, chief counsellor of the massacre of Saint Bartholomew, whose only view about that political crime was that it had been inadequately carried out. Vincent went to Paris, stated his case to Berulle, obtained a parish - Chatillon in La Bresse - fled thither, and wrote to say he was coming back no more to Montmirail. The dismay of M. and Mme de Gondi was almost comical. Gondi wrote to his wife that Vincent's reasons were worthless - nothing was so important as the salvation of himself and his children. . . . As for Mme de Gondi, she wept, she refused to eat or sleep, she seriously wrote to Vincent that she expected she would die - and she may not have been so wrong, for she had wound the very fibres of her nature round her director, and that was, precisely, one of the things that terrified Saint Vincent.

Ladies of Charity

Meanwhile at Chatillon he was working marvels. The little place aped its betters; it was frivolous and scandalous; ladies chattered behind their fans at Mass; noblemen spitted one another on rapiers in the woods; priests forgot their duty and lounged in lay-attire; the neighbourhood of Geneva sent forth its Protestant fumes. Astonishingly, Vincent was able to impress the priests, and even banded them together in a sort of community; he catechized the children; he actually

lodged in the house of a riotous young Huguenot - and, to the universal amazement, converted him - an amazement far outpassed when a Comte de Rougemont, notorious debauchee and literally mad on duelling, came from curiosity to hear Vincent preach, was converted out-of-hand but lastingly, sold his castle, and would (had Vincent not prevented him) have sold the whole of his estates, and finally, after a fierce struggle, broke his sword against a stone. "I cut, I break, I shatter everything, and I go straight to heaven", he kept crying, and, I repeat, the conversion lasted. So did that of two noble and flamboyant ladies, Mesdames de la Chassaigne and de Brie. Their conversion too was abrupt but total. Plague was still raging - they nursed the stricken. One of them begged him, just before Mass one day, to ask that an indigent family be helped. He did so, and soon after Mass he met half the countryside, which had been taking gifts to that one house.... He saw at once that even Catholic charity needed a minimum of "organization", and he grouped along with these two ladies some others, and gave them a little rule approved by the Archbishop.

This was the real birth of the Sisters of Charity! The day was December 8th, 1617, when the rule was given, and the original, written by Vincent himself, was discovered so recently as 1839. Impossible to quote it here. Its details range from the most practical, such as how to arrange a tray on a sick bed, up to the most delicately psychological, such as, "try to visit, first, anyone who has companions, so as to have all the longer to spare for those who are quite lonely". But the two essential innovations made by Vincent were these - active charity is not an affair for nuns alone, or priests, but for all, laymen and laywomen, and the latter, be they widows, married or spinsters. And, again, the administration of charity can be done collectively, in an orderly way, and not haphazard nor spasmodically. Herein is

the germ of practically all modern philanthropy, and more, for the love of Christ was what urged Vincent forward in this as in all else.

You would say that Vincent had been sent to Chatillon simply in order to begin this sort of work. Even before it had been accomplished, the Gondi family had approached Berulle and said that they really must have Vincent home again. Berulle sent for the saint, who yielded to his arguments, and left Chatillon after a stay of no more than five months. For the sake of clearness it is better to say here, simply, that during the few years of life left to Mme de Gondi, Vincent's substantial occupations were these: along with that devoted lady he founded throughout her estates Associations of Charity like the one started at Chatillon; and noted that her vast but vague ideas - set going by the conversions at Folleville - of evangelizing those estates by means of an order of preaching-priests, had crystallized considerably. She was prepared to set aside a sum of 16,000 *livres* for the formation of a preaching-congregation, or band, of priests, who would give missions all through her villages every five years. The Jesuits could not get leave for this undertaking; the Oratory refused it. The Gondi who was holding the See of Paris decided to form a definite congregation of men who would seek no preferment, would confine their work to villages, and would live from a common purse. In 1625, the congregation was, in fact, founded and the deed of contract signed, with the startling proviso that Vincent, who was to be superior, should reside not in the College des Bons Enfants, placed at these priests' disposal, but in the house of the founders themselves. Vincent yielded to what must have seemed a terrible inconvenience, since Mme de Gondi was still quite young. But within two months she died, in her will demanding that Vincent should stay with her husband and her sons. But almost at once, M. de Gondi allowed Vincent to move to his true headquarters, and

within two years made the sensational renouncement of all his magnificence, and became an Oratorian priest. Vincent was definitely free to begin his life's work - but he was nearly fifty years old! So prolonged and so intricate was the preparation that God saw necessary for his marvellous career, henceforward destined to develop with incredible rapidity.

The Galley Slaves

It now becomes difficult to decide how to recount Vincent's history within the limits of this pamphlet. If chronological order be observed exactly, his activities will be found interwoven and perhaps confused. If they be grouped under certain heads, the reasons of their genesis and development will be obscured. One episode we can place by itself - the galleys. Gondi was General of the Galleys, a Mediterranean squadron of some 20 ships, each rowed by 300 galley-men, and manned by about 120 fighting-men. Criminals condemned to this work were first kept chained in prison, whence they were taken to their galley, there, too, chained to their thwarts, and stripped to the waist to receive lashes from the long whips of two officers, who used these not only to punish them, but to make them start or row quicker. Contemporary documents describe the absolute hell in which these men lived, especially when it was rough, bitterly cold (as the Mediterranean can be), or stiflingly hot, as when the sirocco blows. The condition of these men during an engagement, or when the vessel caught fire, or blew up, or sank, can be imagined. While Vincent was with the Gondis, the General led several expeditions, notably in 1620, 1621, and 1622. Naturally these formed the theme of talk at home. Vincent had long before that asked to visit the Paris prisons. Appalled by their filth, reek, and wickedness, he began at least by equipping a large hospital whither were transported

the men suffering from the filthiest and most infectious diseases. Here, with two of his friends, he visited them.

Great personages let Louis XIII know of this, and in February 1619 he created the office of chaplain-general to the galleys of France, and appointed Vincent to it. He was to rank as an officer and to take precedence of all other chaplains.

Impossible to relate in detail his visits to the various ports, beginning with Marseilles, nor the complete mission of a month that he, with twenty other religious, preached to the whole squadron in 1623. Enough to recall that here were thousands of men in black misery of mind and horrible conditions for their bodies, hitherto absolutely uncared for even by good Christians. They festered like rats dying in the dark. Suddenly there appeared a man amongst them who actually loved them, loved them with all his heart, was able so to ease their soul that their pain of body hardly seemed any more to matter, and who lifted their whole life into another air, another world. A story is told that Vincent once took, at the oar, the place of a convict who had been torn from wife and children. Where, or when this happened, is unknown. So are all details as to how. Its possibility has been roundly denied. Yet there seems a variety of sound evidence for its having happened in some shape; nor is it impossible. Unnecessary even to suppose that the convict was a time-expired man, shamelessly (as often happened) kept for years in the galley as a useful oarsman or because no substitute was forthcoming, or just forgotten, like Joseph in his gaol. People succumbed to Vincent in a passion of pity persuading a "gaoler" to unfetter the man, let him go on shore, and chain Vincent in his place. He may have remained there for but a day, even an hour. Vincent was asked about it later. He would smile and change the subject, but never denied it, easy and natural as that would have been, especially to a man of his intense humility. The work in the galleys took on no special development, and, in the

nature of things, came to an end when the galley system did. But Vincent's work among and for priests began at once, endured and endures, and was required for most of what else he did. It is, then, reasonable to put it first and see it comprehensively.

Work for Priests

Vincent had early found, as we saw, that he could *be* a parish priest, influence such priests, or exercise no less deep an influence as a missionary priest, or, finally, that he could live "in community". When in 1625 he went to the Bons Enfants he had only two companions, with whom he went preaching from village to village, leaving the house to a neighbour's care. Recruits came: and next year the companions pledged themselves to live as an association under Vincent and his successors. In 1630 the superior of the Augustinian Canons Regular at Saint Lazare - a very relaxed community - begged Vincent to come there to live, join forces, and incidentally reform the Augustinians. He refused. Yet in 1632 he yielded in this sense - his company went to live at Saint Lazare, as an independent community in that immense building.

In the same year (January) the Pope had recognized Vincent's priests as the "Congregation of the Mission". This was the centre of his life's care. It implied, first, the forming of good priests; then, the re-forming of bad ones; then, the giving of country "missions". Rather as Saint Ignatius had never wanted to provide the Jesuits with a rule, or foreseen what his original little band should develop into, so Vincent started without foreseeing either rule or vows of religion for his companions. Yet when at last it was borne in upon him that, at least for cohesion's sake, both were necessary, he petitioned and re-petitioned the Pope for his approval, which was at long last granted, in 1658, two years only before

Vincent's death! It is impossible to quote passages showing Vincent's training of his young society - a training which after 1640 (when he rarely left Paris) had to be done chiefly by innumerable letters - enough to say that it insisted naturally on the complete self-renunciation which must be the essence of the life of a true priest - renunciation not only of the outside lure of money, position, power, but of the interior self-will which is every man's last idol. Personally, I think that the contemporary degradation of the clergy was largely due to despair. What could they do, among the "blackened animals" who grubbed for roots in order to live, while a few great lords lived in luxury at their most bitter expense? The lower clergy simply gave up hope. In a single diocese, its Bishop wrote to Vincent in 1628, there were nearly seven thousand drunken and immoral priests. As in Italy and the Netherlands - so the early Jesuits had found - the formula of absolution was practically unknown. Mme de Gondi herself had to pass that formula, written out in full, to the country priest who heard her confession, to get herself properly absolved. Meanwhile, those who could by virtue of birth, look forward to the higher ecclesiastical ranks, regarded them simply as methods of aggrandizement and wealth.

There were exceptions: it was the Bishop of Beauvais who suggested to Vincent the revival of an old custom - ordination Retreats. These had an almost sensational success at Beauvais and at Saint Lazare; and in Paris they were followed up by the "Tuesday Conferences", to which a few young priests - Olier and Bossuet among them - came to discuss some subject that suited their vocation. Richelieu asked, in confidence, for a list of the priests who had proved their worth at these, that he might make them Bishops. But not even retreats, made for a few days before ordination, nor weekly reunions, were going to be enough to transform an entire clergy. Vincent tried to obey the Council of Trent by

forming seminaries; at first he failed; later the Lazarist seminaries became famous. Meanwhile, he forbade anyone who had anything to do with retreats or conferences to breathe one word which might suggest that visitors should join his company - he would not even pray for its development! He left that to God, and moved not one finger to obtain it.

You could embark on the reformation of a sick society in two ways - either the conversion, or gradual preparation, of men already eminent or destined to become so, or the immediate healing of the masses. Think these out, and you will find it hard to say which is the more difficult. Vincent certainly aimed at forming leaders, and nothing more nearly broke his heart than the failure of any of his men to persevere. Some accepted all the training he could give them, and then went off, even asking for money to compensate for the wasted years, or to establish themselves elsewhere. This was a strong motive for him to ask for authority to approve the taking of a vow. But he also, from the outset, and to the end, insisted that "country missions" were of the essence of his work. For, while the leader, the notable champion, was being formed, obscure souls were suffering and perishing. He had, in the country parts, to approach a peasantry all but brutalized by war, famine, ignorance, and contemptuous, tyrannical neglect. And one of his hardest tasks was to persuade his priests to speak with the needed simplicity. It was still the age of "pulpit oratory". The passion for "making phrases" certainly did not die with the age, and probably never will. But at least he made his priests, three at a time, arrive where the mission was to be given, and dwell there like the poorest of poor men, preach to the adult labouring population early in the morning and at sundown, and catechize the children at noon. Meanwhile they would visit the sick, and, above all, reconcile those who were at enmity. When they left, they returned the cooking-utensils they had

borrowed, and paid their tiny debts. Pathetically, Vincent, in whose ears the dumb misery of the country sounded so loud, felt, when he returned to Paris from a mission, as though the very gates of the city must fall in wrath upon him, for that he had deserted the thousands of wretched souls within the walls.

The Congregation of the Mission

It is impossible to recount the spread of the Congregation of the Mission, even in Vincent's own lifetime, with any detail. In the nature of things, however, the work of the Congregation could not remain confined to missions in the villages. Events that we shall mention (like war or plague) were, anyhow, to drag Vincent's priests out of the original framework of their enterprise. But in a sense the work for the galleys was what developed into Vincent's sending men to North Africa, not to mention his own memories of a slave's life. It is said that there were more than 20,000 Christian slaves in chains at Algiers, 6,000 more at Tunis - about 40,000 altogether. Their material and spiritual conditions were appalling, and the saint's heart bled for them. Vincent not only began to send chaplains out to the slave-centres, but obtained through the Duchess d'Aiguillon the purchase of at least two consulates, and placed there, first, worthy laymen, and then actually priests of his Congregation. Propaganda itself [in Rome] was indignant - priests could not exercise such offices! Vincent begged so well that they should, that Propaganda ended by giving leave, and certainly the post meant nothing but hardships, even torture, and, not rarely, martyrdom. Martyrdom befell, too, many of the Christian slaves who either remained faithful to their creed or returned to it; and it is strange to hear of little English boys who had been carried off receiving consolation or conversion, and even the grace to die happy, by means of Saint Vincent's sons. It is appalling to reflect on the history

of these little lads - at eleven, twelve, to have been kidnapped, never to see home again, to endure the African sun, the African filth, above all the African vice and cruelty. Such thoughts check any surprise that we else might feel when we read that Vincent tried hard to raise and send forth a punitive and protective expedition which should coerce the Turkish pirates. He died just before it could be arranged; but the project was revived later on and carried through, nor did Algerian pirate-ships cease from the seas till 1830. [This was the year that the Barbary pirates were finally defeated by France to become the colony of Algeria and Tunisia.]

Meanwhile, at the Pope's suggestion, Vincent was sending priests to Ireland and to Scotland. The marriage of Charles I with Henrietta of France had sent all English Catholic hopes sky-high. With that almost exasperating humility of his, Vincent forbade the eight missionaries to Ireland to write an account of their doings. "Enough that God knows about it." In consequence we have but little evidence about their mission save that it was blessed incredibly. Its centres were Limerick and Cashel. Far harder was the task of Fathers Duggan and White, who entered Scotland in 1651, and went, the former to the Hebrides, the latter all over the mainland. Both in Ireland and in Scotland the Protectorate of Cromwell brought a violent recrudescence of persecution and undid much of the Vincentian work. [Cornwall had a part to play in this sad episode.] But in the year in which they entered Scotland the Congregation of the Missions went, too, to Poland, invited by Marie Louise Gonzaga, the new and very Gallicising Queen. She insisted on having the priests, the Sisters of Charity (of whom below), and the Visitation nuns. Indeed, she and the country needed them. Plague, almost at once; then frightful war - Russia and her Cossacks, Sweden and the trained troops of Gustavus Adolphus to this side and to that; and, again, politics, then always mixed with religion (as religion today is so often and

so disastrously mixed with politics), threatening to drag Poland away from her Catholic allegiance, and almost doing so. When the Congregation surmounted difficulties such as these, it was not difficult to find an entry into Italy, Catholic in its very marrow, though desperately needing spiritual help. There too it was the reform and education of the clergy that the Congregation first concentrated on.

Unquestionably, the map of the world had unrolled itself before Vincent, and he saw it as populated with souls. Souls, moreover, in danger of being lost. In fact, he was so appalled at the disasters incurred by the Catholic Faith in Europe, that he could promise himself no certainty as to the Catholic future of France, of Italy, of Poland. He contemplated firmly the prospect of Christianity being transferred to "pagan parts". He insisted again and again that, while God had promised permanence to His Church, He had not promised her permanence within any one country or continent. Moreover, with a boldness that we are too shamefaced to emulate, he put down the catastrophes of the European reformation almost wholly to the unworthiness of Europe's priests. Hence he sent forth his Congregation to Madagascar, knowing it to be called the White Man's Grave, and was dreaming of Persia, Egypt, Brazil, and even China, when all the maps were rolled up for him, and he died. The Congregation then numbered about 500 members. Today it actually numbers 5,000 priests altogether, grouped in 18 provinces in Europe; 15 in Asia, 2 in Africa, 10 in N. and S. America, and 2 in Oceania. We could wish that those who are so familiar with the name of Saint Vincent through the S. V. P. [or SVDP] conferences (which were founded in memory of him, but not by him) knew equally well that he actually did found not only the Sisters of Charity, but a "double family", of Sisters and of the Missionary Priests: he was head, that is, Superior General, of both.

The Sisters of Charity and the S. V. P.

It can safely be said that most people now associate the name of Vincent, not so much with priests, as with the laymen's "Society of Saint Vincent de Paul" [the SVDP], founded in 1833 by Frederick Ozanam in Paris, and perhaps with the Sisters of Charity, and their great white *cornette* - that heavenly winged head-dress which, with their grey robe, was once so familiar in the sad streets of cities. Of Vincent's "charitable" work we now have to write.

In speaking of that work, we maintain two things: first, that the immense philanthropic movement and reform in France about this time was substantially due to him - some modern writers have tried to lessen his actual role, and also, to distribute it among others; second, that it stands to reason he was not the only charitable person in France, let alone the world - his work was largely one of stimulating good wills and co-ordinating them, and he would have done nothing (save spiritually) without the co-operation of a large number of heroic souls, and, indeed, without the assistance of important personages (since it was a world and era of personages) and of large gifts of money. You must realize that the mass of the people could contribute nothing whatsoever; they were taxed and re-taxed till their very souls bled white; there was no Press, no advertisement; no charitable institutions in the modern sense existed, still less any non-religious philanthropic work. The Huguenot Renaudot, who certainly tried to put both the law and medicine and an organized employment bureau at the disposal of the people, was misunderstood by the people itself, and furiously attacked by the legal and medical cliques, not to mention the government itself, always in a panic of popular plot or intrigue. Vincent worked from the highest motive that is, the love of God and of Christ, and,

even human-wise, was right in doing so, because nothing else even began to be understood.

As for his actual charitable work, it started, as we have seen, by accident. At Chatillon, the chaotic largesse that followed a "charity sermon" for an individual case taught him indeed how tragic such cases were, but also what need there was of organization, just as the revelation that one "respectable man" had always been making bad confessions convinced him of the need of systematic evangelization of the countryside.

The association of ladies founded at Chatillon was reproduced in other centres, naturally throughout all the Gondi estates, but notably at Macon, where the sight of innumerable beggars caused him to have a list of all the local indigent drawn up, and a further result was the foundation of a confraternity of men to cope with them. In Paris he began with the re-organization of the Hotel-Dieu Hospital, through which 25,000 sick persons passed each year. Even this started because one of his great assistants, Mme Goussaulte, told him that no one could be treated there until he had been to Communion, a rule that led to innumerable sacrileges. "Ladies of Charity", visiting the hospital regularly, were now able to give at least some instruction along with their soups and to judge of the fitness of sick persons for the Sacraments, and even to lead them to be fit. By 1650 there were, it is said, 40,000 beggars in Paris out of a population of less than 500,000. Romances have made us fairly familiar with their appalling life of misery, crime, disease, and violent death. The Ladies were thrilled to hear that all this was to be stopped. Land and buildings had been assigned to Vincent at the Salpetriere, where an 'Hospital General' was to be arranged into which all beggars were to be put in three sections - young boys; men; children, women, and the aged. Vincent never liked nor really looked

after this, because, it has been suggested, it was not really a job for the Ladies of Charity, nor indeed for anyone save the Archers, or police, who finally took charge of it.

Far more in keeping with the powers of these usually wealthy and refined though merciful-minded ladies was the rescue of foundling children, which began much earlier; and it is this that has caught popular imagination with regard to Saint Vincent, and his statues always show him looking after babies. Even the gentle Vincent went nearly off his head when, one day, he saw a man maiming a little child to make it a more efficacious adjunct to his begging. Unwanted children were, in fact, disposed of in what had begun as a benevolent institution - the Couche Saint Landry - but by 1638 had become the scene of hideous cruelty, if not wholesale extermination. A proper house was hired, and not till 1670, ten years after Vincent's death, did the State take over once more the care of those whose well-being was an appalling strain on the finances of the Ladies, especially as war diverted the sympathy and alms to the starving populations who lay in the track of armies. Meanwhile, Vincent had a place to visit which gave him a pure joy. He knew every baby by its name.

It seems cruel to omit the constellation of noble names that clustered round Saint Vincent's; but they would have remained mere names, as space lacks for those anecdotes which alone could indicate why they shone; and, although the Queen herself had a group of these ladies in the palace, it remains that Vincent loved much better his "Daughters of Charity" who had no titles and whose names have disappeared. One name at least must always be remembered - Mme Le Gras. Louise de Marillac had married M. Le Gras, secretary to Marie de Medici, at twenty-two. A woman of passionate yet deep and practical religion, quite unable to adapt herself to Court life, she might have made

havoc of her spiritual life too, had it not been for wise direction, given first by the Bishop of Bellay, Le Camus, and then by Vincent. She recognized the need of holiness; they, that of solid character and of self-effacing, persevering work. They checked her anxieties about fasting, penances, arithmetical devotion - "so many 'acts' per day". Her husband died in 1626; she moved into a small house, and for three years did solitary work for the poor of the district.

At last Vincent sent her to Montmirail to see how the confraternity of charity was getting on. This inaugurated a long series of tours among the confraternities - a really astounding enterprise if you reflect that she had to travel and live very roughly, commend herself to ladies who did not know her nor much desire her presence (especially if they needed re-stimulating or reforming), and that her entire sanction was the personal repute or memory of Vincent. Moreover, the whole idea was perfectly new. As for Louise, experience convinced her that a far more definite organization was needed: the confraternities were at the mercy of enthusiasms, despondencies, personal likes and dislikes. Here and there girls presented themselves who felt the same. She asked them to come and stay with her in Paris, to "learn the ropes". At first they acted there as little more than the emissaries or agents of the Ladies of Charity. But at last, 1634, Louise Le Gras was allowed to take a personal vow, and after six years a small proportion of her companions was allowed to do the same, though, even so, only for a year at a time. Thus was inaugurated the Company of the Servants of the Poor.

At a time when the only method of treating women in regard to life at large was to keep them from contact with it, and when it was certainly not respectable, and usually not safe, for women to venture forth alone, these girls were to have to go everywhere, in city and in country, in hospital, in slum,

on battlefield (though Vincent did not foresee that), breathing an infected air in every sense: girls, moreover, most of them simple to the point of roughness, to whom even the Paris of that day was a marvel, often ignorant almost of their A B C. No wonder that a substantial part of their training under Mme Le Gras was sheer instruction; no wonder that the discipline of their life was austere exceedingly. No wonder that stability was so hard to ensure that once a "vocation" wavered, or a candidate left, Vincent would never take her back. Only with the most violent effort of sympathetic and instructed imagination can we realize what then was meant by a Community having "no monastery but the sick-room; no cell but a hired lodging; no chapel save the parish church; no cloister but the street". But the effort must be made all over again, if we would realize what sick-rooms were then like; what the streets were like; alas, what parish churches were like, given, too often, the character of their priests, who at best were considered the lackeys of great personages who might choose to worship, flirt, and chatter there. Every horror had to be seen by them, physical and moral; and they had to endure suspicion seeing that their vocation was so totally new. Utterly different was it from that of Court ladies, who, appalled by the wickedness and almost insanity of the life of wealth, fashion, and position, fled to Caramel, or even to Port Royal [the one an austere Catholic cloister the other a sad though highly regarded hotbed of Jansenist nuns].

Ecclesiastical Reformer

No life of Vincent de Paul can confine itself to his exterior and lasting creations: he was personally involved with outstanding historical personages and affairs of State. They were to him an anguish; his success was not really there, and he knew it. A year after he presumably began his education, Henri III and Catherine de Medici died. France

suffered woes untold till Henry IV abjured Protestantism and in the year of Vincent's ordination (1600) married Marie de Medici. Hardly had Vincent returned to France from Rome and had gone to Paris (1610) than Henri was assassinated. Louis XIII became king. He was to die in 1643, and between those dates - at least from 1624 - France had been driven into some sort of a strait-waistcoat by Richelieu. Richelieu died not a year before Louis, so that France fell to the tendance of a Queen-Regent, Anne of Austria, and a King hardly six years old. Somehow, Vincent, from his obscurity, had become appreciated in the Court, and, when Louis XIII lay a-dying, it was for Vincent that he sent and in Vincent's arms expired. Anne was not willing to let go of him. Louis is said to have exclaimed that he wished no Bishop might be appointed who had not spent three years at Saint Lazare. Anne forthwith instituted a Council of Conscience which should deal with preferments. Of its five members, Vincent was one. Incredible association - another was Cardinal Mazarin, the low-born Italian diplomatist who hypnotized the Queen till that indolent lady, who liked to spend half her time in bed, was simply at his mercy. Mazarin had no wish whatsoever to reform the system of preferment. Gifts of mitres was one of his surest methods of preserving "loyalty".

Vincent began gently: he asked that no child should be made Bishop; no man who had not been a priest for at least one year. That no abbey-revenues should be given to anyone under eighteen; no Cathedral canonry to one under sixteen, nor a collegiate canonry to one under fourteen; that the revenues of a See should not be diverted to a lay-nobleman. It has been well pointed out that these elementary demands had to be made in the presence of Cardinal Mazarin, who was not even a deacon, but ranked as Bishop Metz and held thirty abbeys in his financial grip. . . . Vincent found his popularity and even the finances of his charitable establishments were waning. For, with a thousand

opportunities, now, for obtaining rich livings for the relatives of his petitioners, he refused even to consider a man save on his merits. A duchess went behind his back to the Queen, begged for the See of Poitiers for her son, a drunken young debauchee. The good-natured, languid Queen assented, summoned Vincent, and bade him draw up the necessary document. Vincent returned next day with a blank sheet of paper, and told her she must do it herself: he could not. The Queen gave in again, but said that Vincent must tell the duchess. he went to do so, and the duchess threw a footstool at his head. Vincent left the house, blood streaming from his face. Innumerable criticisms and even calumnies began to be spoken against him; they even said that he accepted commissions and percentages. The climax of his woes came during the Fronde rebellion, which began in 1648.

This is not a pamphlet concerned with the secular history or politics of France. Enough, then to say that the autocratic government of the country had practically been made over to the hated foreigner Mazarin by the comfort-loving Queen, and that he and the Court were absorbing the money of the country in an incredible frivolity. Parliament showed the first symptoms of disaffection; then great nobles sided with it, almost for the sake of the fun. Under Richelieu (at least a forceful character and notable man) they had had nothing to do; under Mazarin, they felt themselves doubly degraded. At the back of the comic-opera of a nobles' rebellion lay the frightful misery of the French masses, who simply had not the money with which to pay for Anne's entertainments and the pageants of the Cardinal. Vincent wrote round to his priests that they must keep totally out of politics. He even wrote that "the business of princes are mysteries on which we should not spy" - so wholly of his age was he, save in what concerned the love of Christ, which is ageless. In 1649 Paris was besieged. The frightful spectre of civil war glowered upon the land; in his agony of anxiety for the fate

of the populace, Vincent felt that the mystery was no more mysterious - Mazarin should be got rid of, and he rode through water up to his knees, by way of Clichy, where he was almost killed (till the people recognized their ex-cure and their present universal benefactor), to Saint Germain, and there he told the Queen what he thought. She listened, and passed him on to the Cardinal himself.

Thus Vincent had ruined himself in both directions: the Cardinal never forgave him; and the people, hearing that he had ridden out of Paris to the Court, regarded him as having deserted them, and they sacked Saint Lazare. Impossible for him to remain in Paris. He toured the country - he was seventy-three - and did what he could for the miserable peasants. In March the siege, which had lasted since January, was raised, and he returned. You might have thought that the whole of French society had gone down in ruins during those months - ruins re-ruined during the years that followed. By a fantastic tragedy, one of the chief inflamers of the social blaze was the prelate who held then the coadjutor's office to the See of Paris and became Cardinal de Retz. He was the third of those three sons of M. de Gondi; and Vincent had looked after him until he was ten. Magnificent enough to be a rival of Mazarin, and even of Louis XIV, he lacked the character to see even a rebellion through. Forced into the priesthood in order to retain the Paris See in the Gondi family, though possessed (he wrote) of the world's least ecclesiastical soul, he made a retreat at Saint Lazare to decide whether he would do his best as Bishop, and concluded he would not. During the day, he kept up a religious and even zealous facade, and found he could sway the crowds towards piety. At night, licentiousness and, above all, political intrigue. He chose (he insists in his diary) to do wrong deliberately, and certainly he did it. Even after his arrest, imprisonment, and long disgrace, he was received with kindness by the Vincentian

house in Rome. He came back, long later, to France, when his hair was grey, and died there in retreat, and, we have grounds to trust, repentant. It can be imagined what an added anguish this man's career was, being to Vincent like an adopted son, the more so as Vincent knew himself to be totally helpless. Helpless he was in regard of every potentate. He visited Anne; he wrote to Mazarin; he wrote to the Pope.

He explained that pillage was the least of the miseries that the people were enduring; torture was habitual; the disgrace of women, girls, nuns, at the hands of the soldiery was now normal; the consecrated Hosts were trampled under foot even by Catholic armies, who wished but to seize the eucharistic vessels. For once you see Vincent passionate - dislodged from his customary calm. Passionate charity woke up at the touch of his own passion. Ladies poured their jewels into his lap; tradesmen lavished their wares on him; in the very Court, a league existed and toiled on behalf of the anti-Court rebels. One might almost say that alike Vincent's fervour and that of his associates rose to red-hot fever-pitch. At last peace returned: Louis XIV entered Paris, and soon after him, Mazarin did so too. The people were too exhausted to resent him: they even persuaded themselves that they had loved him.

Last Days

By now Vincent was very old, and still more was he very tired. The papal sanction given to his work was his only, but great, consolation. He confessed that the spirit of charity in Paris seemed dried up - he could collect but a small percentage of the alms that were more and more necessary. His legs began to swell - he had to be carried to the chapel and the refectory. A heavy somnolence, too, invaded him; he simply said that the brother was ahead of the sister - sleep

had anticipated death. Yet there he sat, all day long in an armchair before his little table, keeping level with the dreadful correspondence which was his only means, now, of communication with the world and with his children. And just as the cheery smile never faded from those firm-carved features, so the clear thought does not waver for a moment in his latest letters.

Early in 1660 he grew notably weaker. And in February, M. Portail, his oldest and ever-faithful friend, died; and a month after him, Mme Le Gras died too. Vincent was too weak to go to see her. "I shall follow soon", he wrote. He wrote in July, two letters of farewell - one to the exiled Fr de Gondi (his original patron, now an Oratorian), one (how strange it seems) to Cardinal de Retz, himself, too, in exile at Rome. He begs their pardon for his "boorishness", that must have made them suffer. . . . On August 27th, for the last time, he gathered round his armchair his Sisters of Charity, and gave them a new superior. Then he decided who should be head of the Missionary Priests. By now his ulcerated limbs were giving him an intolerable pain: he could raise himself in bed only by pulling at a rope fastened to a beam above him. On September 26th he received Extreme Unction, and later, in the evening, when they tried to help him by whispering now one prayer, or passage from the Scriptures, now another, he would struggle to reply, but mostly said the single word "*Paratum*" ("Ready"), and loved to have simple invocations of Our Lady suggested to him, or his favourite prayer: "O God, make speed to help me - O Lord, make haste to succour me". The night passed, and early morning came. They asked for one more blessing: he raised his hand and gave it, adding, "He who began a good work, Himself will make it perfect".

At two o'clock he murmured: "I believe"; and then, "*Confido*" ("I trust"). Finally, September 27th, 1660, at four in the

morning, still seated in his armchair, he died in perfect serenity, without having spoken again. It was the hour when for so long he had risen to pray.

Postscript

These pages have been none too helpful for forming an estimate of Vincent's character. This is well known to us, but almost wholly from his letters. From an account of his work, you see almost exclusively the man of enormous energy, wide and comprehensive outlook, startling originality, indomitable courage, and organizing capacity. You see him, to start with, undismayed by the appalling condition of his world, and not least of the clergy. You see him without delay seeking to raise the general level of that clergy, and to form heroes amongst a worthy average. You see him taking the whole of society - from foundling to the aged, from peasant to courtier, from prisoner, lunatic, the sick, the mendicant, up to kings and queens. He "talked with crowds, and kept his virtue: and walked with kings, nor lost the common touch". Neither flattery nor abuse, lofty positions nor lampoons, critics nor devotees, were able to dislodge him from his perfect equanimity of mind and equity of act. It certainly is remarkable that his work began almost wholly, you would say, by accident; but that such accidents should have power so profoundly to affect him is already a light upon his character. He inspired, and he organized; of him it was never to be said: "You could a people raise, but could not lead". At first sight, one might have cried: "These enthusiasms cannot last"; or, again, "Organization always kills". But the concrete rebuttal is the existence of the Sisters of Charity and of the Ladies of Charity in our midst today - who does not know those Sisters? and how many of those whom they serve have ever heard of Richelieu, of Anne of Austria, even of Louis XIV? And again, where a man's example and memory are creative centuries after he

has died, he has doubly defeated death. And Vincent is thus creative - whence else did Ozanam draw inspiration or find a name for his Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, whose conferences are found the whole world over?

As for his character, you begin, indeed, by seeing in him all the best qualities of the French peasant, and how, by God's grace, these developed themselves as never they would have, had he remained upon his father's farm, and also, how likely they would have been to degenerate into the French peasant's vices had he done so. You see definitely his preoccupation with money - and the more remarkable his perfect detachment from it when enormous sums passed through his hands; his tendency to be ashamed of a low social status - the more striking his complete indifference to rank as such thereafter; his dawning ambitions, even ecclesiastical - the more impressive his total self-abnegation when he could have had every dignity he asked for; a certain hardness and unsympathy, that "dried-up, caustic temper", those "black and boiling moods", that he diagnosed in himself - and this was the man whom all with one instinct were to name "*le bon M. Vincent*" - and how impossible it is to find one word for that expressive French one. It means good, and kind, and dear - "dear" almost above all. A loveliness in the goodness; no condescension in the kindness. Possibly the fierce experience of enslavement may have been needed to school his virtues to perfection, and rinse out of his natural qualities all taint.

It may be rash to compare Saint Vincent with Saint Paul; but one cannot forbear from doing so when one notices in each how long a preparation was needed for due work; how repeated the set-back (so to say) seemed to be. Saint Paul left to himself at home after his conversion, and again apparently disregarded: Saint Vincent, tutoring boys; priest in a tiny parish; even his successes seemingly discounted,

and his return to Gondi tutelage. He is a marvellous example of "not getting ahead of the Holy Ghost", and, again, of doing the very maximum once he perceived God's Will. I do not think that Vincent was by nature a man of vast ideas, sweeping plans. He always required some sort of "accidental" - that is, Providential - hint as to what he should do next; once he had received it, he wanted to do everything - regenerate *all* priests, save *all* babies. Even his organizing powers seemed evoked by the necessities of the case.

Out of all that might be said I will choose two points only. The first is, that in all his benevolence there was no sort of softness. In his period, you would chiefly have noticed an appalling slackness, and a horrible hardness - it was the time when Jansenism was rendering life miserable by its un-Christian exigencies and cramping every soul that fell victim to it. Vincent was on close terms with the leaders of Port Royal - you might almost have expected that that was the very movement towards reform that would have attracted him. So it did, at first; but the moment it went awry - the moment he discerned in Monsieur Saint Cyran that fund of Protestantism and destructive zeal that came to mark him - Vincent sprang back with horror. Yet in his own priests, or Sisters, he demanded a detachment so complete as almost to be terrifying. Half-measures were intolerable in those who had given their lives to God's direct service. Hence his letters are as austere as they are affectionate, shrewd, level-headed, vivacious. Thus, in our age of selfishness, we have an example of absolute self-sacrificing love; in our age of sentimentalism, we have an example of rigid adherence to principle, and to an exacting ideal. Christ asks lovingly from His Christians; but He asks much.

Secondly, throughout his work, Vincent had our Lord before his eyes. He was not a-tilt against the established order; he

kept - with unthinkable determination - out of politics; he was no theorist about taxes, titles, democracy, equality. He saw men, God's children; he saw Christ, God's Son; he saw himself, able to serve Christ in all, and all for Christ. I would pray, then, that Vincent de Paul may obtain for men and women of our day - whether they be actually members of one of the "Vincentian" organizations or not - that triple vision; God, Christ, our fellow-men and women: and that he will obtain for us the grace of total self-dedication to the service of them all. I pray that Saint Vincent may slay out of us the last fibre of selfishness, and obtain, to replace it, the manifold grace of God's most holy Spirit.

About This EBook

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The cover image is a detail of a painting of Saint Vincent de Paul rising to heaven, 19th century, artist unknown. The painting is in the Chapelle Saint-Vincent-de-Paul in Paris, France; it was photographed on 23 September 2008 by FLLL, and the image swiped from [Wikimedia Commons](#).

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